

BBC muddying the waters

Anyone listening to the BBC news last week would have heard a misleading headline that Germany's finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble said that we would not be allowed to stay in the Single Market.

However, if you listened to the article in full, what he actually said was that if we were to stay in the Single Market, we would have to abide by the rules, including accepting the "four freedoms". In other words, a bespoke deal isn't on offer.

This is no great shakes. Whatever the wishes of many "leave" supporters, it will be the government which negotiates our exit strategy and we know that senior civil servants have been downloading Flexcit, an exit strategy document co-authored by, among others, Dr Richard North and CIB Committee member Robert Oulds of the Bruges Group. This advocates remaining in the Single Market by re-joining EFTA and thus accessing it via the EEA agreement.

Herr Schäuble's words on which the BBC based their headline were given in response to the assertion that "Britain could continue to enjoy the benefits of the single market without being an EU member, in the same way that Switzerland and Norway do." He replied, "That won't work. It would require the country to abide by the rules of a club from which it currently wants to withdraw. If the majority in Britain opts for Brexit, that would be a decision against the single market. In is in. Out is out. One has to respect the sovereignty of the British people."

As Dr North pointed out, "The man thinks the EFTA/EEA (interim) option wouldn't work. And that is on the basis of his interpretation that a vote for Brexit by the British people necessarily means a rejection of participation in the

Single Market... What we have therefore, is an opinion based on an assumption, and nothing more than that – from a politician who is not a head of government, and who may not even be in office by the time Article 50 negotiations start in earnest... The finance minister is just another noisemaker in a debate polluted by noise. “

While it is true that the degree of extra control over immigration which the EEA/EFTA route will allow us is not the same as that which may Brexit supporters desire, a recent poll conducted by Opinium, for the Bruges Group, yielded the following results:

33% = Remain EU and Remain in the Single Market
13% = Leave EU, join EFTA, Remain in Single Market
39% = Leave EU, and have a Free Trade Agreement
16% = Don't Know
Taking out the Don't Knows, gives:
61% = Options to Leave EU (FTA + EFTA)
39% = Options to remain in the EU

(See here for a more detailed analysis of the result)
The poll shows that so strong is the desire of many to leave the EU that they are not taking much notice of the economic arguments. The “leave” side, however, needs to clean up its act. Recent polls are encouraging, but it would be a shame to lose a winnable referendum when the finishing post is in sight because we are unable to reassure floating voters concerned about their economic well-being that the sky won't fall in on June 24th. EEA/EFTA provides precisely such reassurance.